



President's Message

Unexpected Leadership

Gail Kennedy

As we prepare for the 2011 ALA Annual Conference in New Orleans, my thoughts return to June 2006 when ALA convened in New Orleans just ten months after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city and a large part of the Gulf Coast region. ALA announced in November 2005 that it would honor its commitment to hold the upcoming annual conference in New Orleans and would set aside two days at the beginning of the conference for volunteer service to the city's libraries still struggling to restore facilities, collections, and services.

In making this bold and compassionate decision, the American Library Association took a leadership role in the recovery of New Orleans. As the first major association to hold a convention in the severely damaged Ernest Morial Convention Center where so much human despair and suffering played out in the aftermath of the storm, ALA showed the world that New Orleans had not only survived but was open for business. We went to New Orleans concerned about the creature comforts of lodging, meeting space, and restaurants but soon realized that we were a part of the revival of the economy as well as the spirit of the city. ALA went on to raise over \$500,000 for Katrina relief. ALA's Libraries Build Communities project was founded following the successful New Orleans volunteer service days—over 500 librarians participated—and is now an annual event in all cities where ALA holds conventions. We'll be back and volunteering in service of New Orleans again on June 24, 2011.

ALA became an "unexpected leader" in the recovery of New Orleans. This is but one of the many instances in which organizations or individuals who had no responsibility for action in the wake of Katrina, stepped up to take critical leadership roles. At the LLAMA Leadership Development Seminar held on Sunday during the San Diego ALA Midwinter Meeting, we heard the inspiring story of two librarians from Southern University at New Orleans took over the massive work of reclaiming as many of the Library's books and journals as possible and get the Library back into service for the fall semester following Katrina. Shatiqua Mosby-Wilson and Laurie Gaillard did not wait for direction from above to lead the recovery efforts in their library. They mobilized staff and volunteers to focus on the job at hand rather than the overwhelming

task and the terrible working conditions. They utilized a wide array of leadership skills, including humor and rewards to keep their crew moving forward. The result was a truly miraculous restoration of library services even before the library facilities had been repaired and made usable again. Hurricane Katrina offers rich context for many strong lessons in leadership.

Experience has taught us that when the expected systems and structures fail, new ones develop to fill the void. What propels individuals and organizations to become unexpected leaders? What skills and traits are needed for the swift, decisive and often risky actions required of unexpected leaders? How can we develop and nurture this type of leadership capability in individuals and organizations? In 2007 the Center for Creative Leadership hosted a forum which examined the leadership dimensions of crisis situations based on the experiences of a variety of leaders who played a role in Katrina. A white paper entitled “Stepping into the Void” summarized and explored the findings of that forum. The authors suggest that the capabilities needed for complex challenges like crisis leadership may also be useful in helping organizations and communities as they face ongoing change, even if it is not of the severity of a crisis like Katrina¹.

Complex challenges are those that defy simple leadership strategies. They require flexibility, agility, and novel solutions and often demand collective responses rather than individual ones. The stakes are high in a complex challenge and the leader is often torn between the pressure to act and the need to reflect. Individual and organizational competencies, including collaboration, adaptability, awareness of the environment, courage, risk-taking, co-inquiry, creativity and the ability to foster creativity in others, are those that help leaders navigate complex challenges. (Rego, 45-46). If these skills empowered the unexpected leaders during Katrina, they should also serve us well when we step into the void in the complex challenge situations that are occurring in all libraries today.

In LLAMA we recognize and nurture leaders at all levels, both the expected and the unexpected variety. We will continue to explore the topic of unexpected leadership at the LLAMA President’s Program during the ALA annual conference. Watch for the speaker announcement coming soon. I hope to see you there!

¹ Lyndon Rego and Rebecca Garau. “Stepping into the Void.” White paper based on reflections and insights from the forum “Crisis Leadership: Lessons from the Frontlines” held by the Center for Creative Leadership, March 13-15, 2007, Greensboro, NC., <http://www.ccl.org/leadership/pdf/research/SteppingIntoVoid.pdf>

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